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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a program of interdisciplinary studies for high-school students who are not motivated to learn in the conventional academic setting. The program began with a work-incentive program that used points as the basis for weekly grades in reading, composition, and skill development. Collaboration of teachers of industrial arts, science, social studies, and English resulted in improved interdepartmental communication, greater reinforcement of particular concepts and subject materials, and better student attention and motivation. Interdiciplinary studies required neither a great number of scheduling changes nor a vast amount of money. Collaboration, however, did not evolve from administrative decree; the program was founded on teachers' benefit and desire. (KS)

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Teaching Reading and Study Skills Through Interdisciplinary Studies

Joan E. Venditto

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting on English Education (15th, Knoxville, Tennessee, March 24-26, 1977)

My description of interdisciplinary studies will focus on a program for students who are not motivated to learn in the conventional academic setting. These students are not interested in reading literature or in improving writing and usage skills. They are interested in getting a diploma and doing only what they must in order to get that diploma.

As I see it, my roll as their teacher is to provide the means for these students to do what they have to do--in science, social studies, industrial arts--to get the diploma. In the process, I teach some reading and study skills.

This interdisciplinary program at Daniel Hand High School in Madison, Connecticut is set in the context of the English classroom. It began with my attempt to individualize the instruction of these non-motivated juniors and seniors. Each week students in my class receive a point activities sheet on which are listed the various language arts activities from which they may choose that week, and the number of points each activity is worth. At the end of each week students turn in points for a weekly grade. The system is, in effect, a work incentive program and is not new in education. Activities are listed in three categories: reading, composi-

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tion, and skills development. Originally I attempted on my own to relate the activities in these categories to other subjects. I pulled articles from magazines, compiled a bibliography of short stories on subjects which interest the students (automobiles, intrigue, science fiction), and made up fact sheets for the purpose of training the students in the SQ3R method of study (Survey, Question, Read, Recite, and Review).

My work with these students, and my plans to expand my work with them, resulted in our high school receiving a mini grant for classroom reading instruction from the State of Connecticut. The grant provided for the purchase of additional soft-ware (books, worksheets, filmstrips, etc.) for the individualized program I had begun. At this point I attempted to involve the industrial arts teacher who taught these same students. I offered to have him suggest materials for purchase with the grant money, and mentioned that we might plan some lessons together. At the time I thought my suggestion had fallen on deaf ears. However, such overtures are seldom lost on conscientious teachers. Two years later--with no grant money available, I might add--this same industrial arts teacher came to me with a suggestion for some team work. He could get bulk school subscriptions of Hot Rod magazine for less money than students would have to pay on the newsstands. Since so many of our students buy and read Hot Rod anyway, couldn't we offer to sell the magazine to them, and plan some lessons around articles? Of course we

could. Our interdisciplinary studies program was launched!

Each month students who wish, purchase the magazine at a reduced rate. These students then sit with me to point out articles they plan to read in the current issue--usually these are articles which pertain to topics the students will be covering in automechanics class. Then I make up reading and study skills worksheets based on these articles. The industrial arts teacher checks to see that I am interpreting and using technical language correctly. We do not have--nor do we need--a special planning period for this coordination. We meet in the cafeteria at lunch time or consult just before or after a faculty meeting. Not only are the students developing better reading skills and enjoying class more, but the industrial arts teacher is learning more about the teaching of reading. (Needless to say, I am learning more about automechanics!) By his review of the worksheets, he is learning how to effectively ask probing questions based on the text--how to teach reading comprehension. Our use of a common text helps to make us both more effective teachers of our students. For example, the industrial arts teacher recently assigned an automotive project to the students in his class. One of his students remembered that a recent issue of Hot Rod had carried some pertinent information. When he checked it out, he found that the article carried an address for more detailed information. With my assistance, the student pursued this lead. In this way, he learned to utilize a practical research tool--the letter of inquiry.

This student found no need to ask why we have to learn to write business letters.

Joining forces with the industrial arts teacher for interdisciplinary studies was a natural--kids like industrial arts. What about other graduation requirements--science and social studies, for example?

My relationship with science teachers began when I encouraged my students to bring their science texts to English class. They use a chapter in their text to practice study skills. At the same time, science teachers themselves consult with me to learn effective methods of teaching these study skills in their classroom. For example, if I happen to be teaching students how to pick out context clues for vocabulary improvement, I do this by citing illustrations and providing exercises from their science texts. Ideally, the science teacher calls attention to context clues in science class during the same week. In this way, we work together to reinforce each other's efforts. In addition, I am always hunting for or devising my own word puzzles which utilize words and terms pertaining to current science lessons. Such an effort demands a great deal of time initially, but worksheets and word puzzles can be used from year to year. Soon the collection builds up. This effort to relate language arts development to science class work necessitates collaboration among teachers of the two disciplines. Administrators will agree that improved interdepartmental communication

among staff leads to a happier school atmosphere--an advantageous spin-off.

Similar collaboration with social studies teachers was my goal when I initiated a team-taught U.S. History/Language Arts class two years ago. A teacher from the social studies department teamed with an English teacher with the intention of integrating appropriate literary selections, language arts skills, and United States history in a double-period class for non-motivated juniors in our high school. While the course was essentially successful, the major weakness turned out to be one which we least expected: the students were too much together. A ninety-minute period together in one classroom each day wore thin any positive relationships, and magnified any antagonisms. As a result of our experience, I have incorporated some of the successful practices used in this experiment into my interdisciplinary language arts class. I guide students' selection of historical fiction works to coincide with study of the same periods in history class. For example, the well-known short story by Ambrose Bierce entitled "An Occurrence At Owl Creek Bridge," which I have recorded on audio tape, helps the students to understand the personal anguish which was a part of the Civil War. Then, often, the social studies teacher chooses to show the film version of this short story in history class. Occasionally, a writing assignment which grows from this experience earns dual credit, in English as well as in history class. A small amount of time is necessary to plan such interdisciplinary

activities, yet the student response has been gratifying. In addition to supplementing the various history units, I also collaborate with the history teacher for weekly current events sessions. Since students are expected to complete a certain amount of newspaper and periodical reading each week, I provide these reading materials in my English classroom, and make up worksheets for outstanding events of the week. Students gain credit for English by reading and completing worksheets and, at the same time, they are learning how to assimilate the news, as well as preparing for weekly current events sessions in history class.

I have attempted to point out to you how the interdisciplinary studies concept might serve the needs of our students who do not succeed in conventional academic settings. Naturally, I hope I have tempted you to try my ideas in your schools. Before you begin, you might keep in mind two points. First of all, interdisciplinary studies must never be forced upon staff members. Encouragement is crucial, to be sure, but the kind of collaboration which breeds a successful program does not evolve from administrative decrees. Secondly, as I have indicated through a description of my own program, little or no special scheduling is necessary for an interdisciplinary program of this nature. A number of schools have never gotten their interdisciplinary programs started because they call for elaborate--and expensive--scheduling changes, or because teachers were mandated to begin a program they were

not disposed to carry out. Most of you are teachers, not administrators, and I invite you to try what I have tried.

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